

St Martin's Diamond Jubilee, Farnham: 11/06/2017.

" I am the door of the sheepfold...anyone who comes into the fold through me will be safe..."

I have a great love of detective fiction ... especially any stories set in Italy. So, I read Donna Leon; her hero is Commissario Guido Brunetti and stories are set in Venice. I read anything by Andrea Camilleri; his stories featuring Inspector Montalbano are set in Sicily and, if you have seen the TV series you will know that Montalbano lives in a small house with a veranda right on the beach and he goes for a swim most mornings, before solving the latest murder.

Slightly more dated, I also read anything by Len Deighton, whether that be about the Battle of Britain or his spy thrillers.

A few days ago I was deep into one of his books entitled "Yesterday's Spy". The plot is very complicated, and the story is set in London and Nice. So ... not quite Italy, but close enough.

In that book the hero is on the trail of someone who might be a Double Agent. It is a fine Spring morning and the sun is shining. So he stops for a moment on a stroll through Nice and notices that he is outside the Opera House: "There was a rehearsal in progress ... a few bars from Verdi's Requiem were repeated over and over. The red carpet was laid for the Ticket Office, but in the shabby doorway marked Paradis, a policeman barred the way ..."

I stopped. What a lovely bit of writing. 'Paradis' is behind a shabby door; no golden gates. No harps, no heavenly music, just shabbiness. And it's a door which is protected by a policeman. My mind went into overdrive ... was this detail relevant to the story? A closed door ... a policeman ... Paradise ... were these significant clues?

So I did a bit of research. In other words, I looked up the Opera House in Nice on Google and discovered that Paradis refers to the top-most layer of seats in the theatre. What you and I might call "the gods". I have just finished the novel and as I suspected this is a complete red herring ...

However, it set me thinking ...

Here we are, celebrating the Diamond Anniversary of St Martin's. How many people over the decades have shyly come through the door of this church? I think Inevitably of Leslie Cockell, of Ken and Olive Milburn, of Reg and Edith Pink, of Barbara Couvela, of Joy Beresford, Mrs Baker, Doreen Perryman, of Fred Coote (though I would never describe Fred coming through the door shyly ...), Mrs Strover; the girls from Woodlarks ... and countless others, including former curates ... Tim Daykin, the late Geoff Tickner, Adrian Botwright ... all of those people and their predecessors found in this small church a home, a place which echoes with the gentle presence of God. This is not a building that forces you to your knees by its grandeur, but it steals into your heart with a quiet sense of affection. It is a *virtuous* place, by which I mean the virtues as named by St Paul: 'the harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control ...' Over the past few weeks we have witnessed the chaos and evil wrought by terrorists, and it makes us doubly aware that places which have the Christian virtues at their heart are utterly precious. We should rejoice in our heritage and warmly invite others to share in it.

But let me return to my image of the door ... because the door of St Martin's has also seen people walk into this church in deep distress. Think of the difficult times: the two World Wars; the Korean War; the brutal murder of Clare Hutchinson in 1980; the Iraq war ... the numbers of funerals that have happened here across the years, including that of my own mother. St Martin's has been a place of holy shelter ... and in that sense, it

has followed in the footsteps of its patron saint, Martin, who gave shelter and succour to a poor man.

We should rejoice that St Martin's has done this in the past and, pray to God that we shall see it as part of our service to the community in the future ... We should be a part of the Christian family which embraces with courtesy and grace all who are in need and especially the bereaved.

And then think of the people who have gone out of this church through the door to serve others in their lives: I must mention Catherine Crawford and her work in Bible Translation, and her parents and grandparents at Woodlarks and at Farnham Assist; Stephanie Couvela now working as a chaplain at Keele University and before that at Scargill ... and those who have dedicated their lives to medicine from this bit of the parish, people like Peter Webster, and, sparing their blushes, Bill and Sally May who have served this part of Farnham with unstinting and selfless service for decades; and those who have taught in schools here and across the UK, and serve in the Police and local authorities ... the list goes on and on, all of you, whatever your daily work who have brought to that work your Christian understanding ... and I won't mention Funeral Directors !!! ... think of everyone here this morning, the gifts that are in this church this day ... what an amazing group.

We should rejoice that St Martin's is a community that seeks to proclaim the love of God and the love of neighbour in practical action ...

So ... St Martin's ... a place of virtue; St Martin's, a place and a people of comforting strength; St Martin's, a place which nurtures and sends people out to serve our world in Christ's name ...

I began by talking about doors in the Opera House in Nice. I end with another door, this time a Holy Door in Rome.

In October 2015 Pope Francis declared a Year of Extraordinary Jubilee. It was the year in which the Holy Door at St Peter's was unblocked once more and pilgrims could come flocking in. Pope Francis said at the beginning of that year: "The Holy Door will become a Door of Mercy through which anyone who enters will experience the love of God, God who consoles, pardons, and instils hope"

He then went on to suggest that in every diocese in the world each Catholic Bishop should declare which door in their major diocesan church should be a Holy Door. In other words, the idea of a Holy Door was not confined to Rome.

And why all this stuff about a Holy Door? Because the door is a solemn reminder of Jesus. You will recall that he referred to himself as the Door of the Sheepfold: "I am the door of the sheepfold ... anyone who comes into the fold through me will be safe ..."

Whilst as Anglicans we do not fall under the jurisdiction of the Pope, and we do not share the theology which speaks of Indulgences, we can nevertheless, on this lovely occasion take his idea to heart. St Martin's has cherished the virtues, has comforted those in distress and has nurtured those who serve the world in Christ's name ... our Holy Door is not in Rome or Jerusalem or Canterbury, it is right here, opposite the Green and so in this sacred place, may we renew our commitment to Christ, rejoicing in all that we have learnt in the past and trusting in his loving guidance for the future ...

"I am the door of the sheepfold ... anyone who comes into the fold through me will be safe. He will go in and out and will find pasture ..." John 10,9.

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